

The Epistle of St. Paul to Philemon

by the Rev. George B. Duncan, M.A.

Passage studied - Philemon

13th March, 1968

A CLOSE UP OF PAUL

In our study tonight we find that this is an intimate letter and it is different from all the other letters we have from Paul in the sense that it is apparently addressed supremely to one person, although if you look carefully you will find, in v.2. that the range goes out a little bit further than as you continue the letter you find that the focus again narrows down to Philemon. In vv. 1 and 2 it is: "Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon and to our beloved Apphia, and Archippus" - maybe wife and husband - "Archippus our fellow-soldier, and to the church in thy house." Really this letter is ranging out in a sense to Philemon but thinking of him within the fellowship of a Christian Church. I wonder whether you have had a letter from someone that you have treasured, and you have kept it just because it was from a certain person and you like to read it over and over. Personal letters like that have got a tremendous meaning. Here is a personal letter, just a friendly note from Paul to another Christian. First of all let us look at what we can learn here of:-

A. PAUL AND HIS CIRCUMSTANCES

It is important that we should realise that for great Christians it doesn't necessarily mean to say that things are easy. From my experience of my own life and the life of others I would say that the more you are in the service of the Lord the harder it gets, and the older you get the harder it becomes. It doesn't get any easier. Because a man is a man used of God that doesn't mean to say it is easy for him - nine times out of ten it is harder for him than it is for anybody else. Here we find Paul - a prisoner - a prisoner of Jesus Christ. So then:-

(a) There were difficulties In this intensely personal letter, the only one that we have - all the other letters from Paul are to churches - Paul doesn't seem to make any attempt to conceal the facts. Again and again he speaks of himself and his circumstances, v.1. "a prisoner of Jesus Christ" v.9. "a prisoner of Jesus Christ" v.10 "my bonds". He is not writing as Paul the apostle, he is writing as Paul the prisoner. He is writing to a friend, a friendly note, and so he does not mind talking about things quite frankly. He is a prisoner - and that was no rest cure; but not only was he a prisoner - he was getting on. He calls himself "Paul the aged" the old man. When you are young you can cope with things, when you get older you can't cope with them quite so well. Here was Paul and he was now an old man and he was letting slip little things about his circumstances. It would have been so easy for bitterness to have crept into his heart and mind, so easy for a spirit of complaint against his Lord to have soured his spirit but there is not trace of this. He must have been frustrated and galled beyond words. He was a man who loved to be on the move and he was stuck there: he was a man who loved to be on his feet preaching and he was stuck there, in this room - silent. Complete denial of all that he was and all that he wanted to be. There were difficulties. Sometimes you and I find ourselves in circumstances that are difficult and it is wonderful if you have got a friend that you can talk to quite frankly. It is not often you get a friend like that - the innermost inner sort - someone who knows instinctively, and shares. Paul was sharing his difficulties, quite frankly, with Philemon. If there were difficulties:-

(b) There were opportunities Surely this is the attitude of a Christian - to turn a difficulty into an opportunity. There were opportu-

13th March, 1968

ities for two things. First :-

- (i) For Prayer The voice of the preacher might be silenced but not the voice of the intercessor. v.1. Paul - a prisoner; vv. 1, 2 and 3 are simply greetings; then in v.4 the first thing Paul refers to is prayer "I thank my God making mention of thee always in my prayers." So here is a man right in the thick of difficulties and he has found opportunities, opportunities for prayer. If ever words were true these words were true of Paul - "stone walls do not a prison make not iron bars a cage." Here was this man confined to a room and he had got windows that were wide open, looking right out over the world, looking right out over the Church. I often think that this is possibly one of the opportunities that comes to us when we find we are not able to do so much physically, we are getting older a bit, we have to drop certain jobs we used to do but that doesn't mean to say we are going to do less we are going to do a different kind of work, we may do more now than we ever did before but we won't be so busy hurrying here and there, we will have a window that is open, a window that is open so that we can pray. There is always a window and Paul found that his difficulties gave him opportunities for prayer. But there is also an opportunity:-
- (ii) For Preaching For witness - not to the crowds to whom he went but to the ones and the twos that came to him. Now how Onesimus, a runaway slave, came to Paul we don't know, we are not told. He had run away from his master Philemon, travelled hundreds of miles and come to Rome to lose himself; maybe he had heard of Paul away back there in Asia Minor and thought what a tremendous man he was. Then Paul met him. The wonderful thing was that Paul led him to Christ and he calls him "my son whom I have begotten in my bonds". The most unlikely person in a most unlikely place. Fancy leading somebody to Christ there. Supposing Paul had been bitter, resentful, frustrated, irritated, he would never have touched Onesimus, but there he was quietly taking the opportunities.

Paul and his circumstances. There were difficulties but there were opportunities. Then secondly:-

B. PAUL AND HIS CONVERTS

There were two converts - the first was Onesimus but the other was Philemon. Philemon had also been led to Christ by Paul. What was the relationship here? First of all there is:-

- (a) The gratitude that Paul assumes In the case of the converted slave he had experienced this - his most recent convert Onesimus, the thief, the slave, the runaway, whose life was in jeopardy had shown his gratitude in a ministry and service that Paul had found invaluable, and so he describes Onesimus to Philemon as being useful, profitable to me. In the case of the converted master he expects it v.17-20a - he expects it from Philemon, in all probability a wealthy man whose home was the home where the Church met. He was asking a favour. "But is it really a favour" he says "when you owe me your very salvation." I wonder whether we could do with a little more of this kind of attitude in the service of Jesus Christ. We receive a great deal from one another don't we? I am not thinking in terms of ministers, I am thinking in terms of other Christians. They have given us their friendship, they have helped us along the road. Are we grateful? Do we show it? Onesimus showed it already. He was busy trying to be helpful, he was no doubt running errands for Paul, helping in all sorts of little ways to make things easier for the man who had led him to Christ. As for Philemon Paul was going to ask him a favour - "now will you do something for me since I have done so much for you?" We don't very often say thank you to folk who have helped us. There are people who pray for you. Who led you to Christ? Who helped to establish you in the Christian faith? Who showed you how you could serve your Lord? Who has encouraged you when you have been downcast? Who has lifted you up? Who has stood by you? Who has given you their friendship? Ever thanked them? Ever shown it? The gratitude he assumes but:-

- (b) The rectitude he affirms Paul is determined to act correctly and justly. It is pretty clear from v.18 that Onesimus was not only a runaway slave but he was a thief. Paul sends him back to face the consequences of his misdemeanour. When a person is converted that doesn't

13th March, 1968

mean to say that he can sort of wipe out all the consequences of what he has done. He has got to face up to things, there is no running away. It would have been possible for Paul to impose his wishes on Philemon and to order him to forgive and to receive his runaway slave who had now come back as a fellow-Christian. Paul says, I could have told you Philemon that this is what you have got to do. But Paul's rectitude shows itself again and he says, I am not going to do that because if you do it with the wrong motive it isn't worth doing and so I am sending him back and appealing to you out of love for me and out of gratitude and recognising that Onesimus is now a fellow-Christian I am asking you to receive him. There is nothing sloppy or sentimental about being converted, about being a Christian, and we have never to make the Christian gospel of getting right with God an excuse for not getting right with our fellowmen. You remember what our Lord said, "If you come to the altar and bring your gift and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there, go be reconciled to your brother and then when you have done that come and offer your gift." First go - then come. That is to say we are never to make our worship an excuse for evading our other responsibilities. No sloppiness, no sentimentality about Paul. He was thrilled, he was thankful, beyond words for what God had done but he wasn't sloppy about it. The gratitude he assumes and the rectitude he affirms. Paul and his circumstances; Paul and his converts; and then finally:-

C. PAUL AND HIS COLLEAGUES

Here we are dealing with Paul's relationship with Philemon not simply as a convert but as a colleague, partner, fellow-Christian. Paul is so obviously conscious of the fellowship of the Church and of the Spirit. He calls Philemon in v.1 a "fellow-labourer" Archippus v.2 a "fellow-soldier" he speaks of "the church in thy house" his whole thinking is in terms of a fellowship to which he belongs, Philemon belongs, and now Onesimus belongs. There are two things here concerning Paul and his colleagues, the first is:-

(a) His thanks for them In the act of appreciation and in the art of it Paul seems to excel. He begins this letter "I thank my God making mention of thee always in my prayers" and then he sets out some of the qualities for which he is so grateful in his colleague Philemon vv. 5-7. Apparently Philemon was a refreshing kind of person to know and when people came into his company and into his home worn out and tired they went away feeling wonderful, tremendous, there was a hospitality and generosity about him which just warmed the hearts of everybody. The Church met in his house - Paul speaks of "the church in thy house" Philemon was a great person to have in a Church - his love and faith wasn't simply in Christ it was towards others. Are you a refreshing Christian? - Are you the opposite - an exhausting Christian? You and I might do well to stop and ask ourselves -- Do people thank God for us? Is your boss glad that you work in that office? Does he express thanks? Are your patients glad when you come on duty? Is this the kind of attitude and atmosphere? The second thing is:-

(b) His trust in them v.21 "Having confidence more than I say" He was so sure of this man that he knew that not only would he do what he had asked but he would do a lot more. What trust he had. How did he get it? Trust is not a thing we can demand. God won't trust much to you until He has got trust in you, and the more He trusts in you the more He will trust to you. This is something we do all the time. Do you want to get really far in to the fellowship of the Church, really far in, do you? Well don't demand it. This is not a thing you can demand, this is a thing you have got to deserve. How do you deserve it? Prove that you are worthy of trust and you will be trusted: show yourself to be unworthy of trust and you will not be trusted. Neither by God nor by men. Show yourself worthy of trust in little things, do a little thing that you are asked to do do it well. do it regularly, do it reliably, and you will get a bigger job to do. That is the way God rewards -- gives us another job to do. We can never, never, demand this from God we have got to deserve it. If you want to get right in to the work of God, the ways of God, the Church of God, the will of God, if you want to get right in prove yourself worthy of trust. The more

13th March, 1968

trustworthy you are the more trust God has in you the more trust God will give you. Here is Paul writing to this man and he is absolutely confident. Why? Because he has proved him. He says, I know perfectly well that Philemon won't only do what I ask but he will do a whole heap more. People like that are an absolute godsend to any Church. Ask them to do something and you know it will be done, you don't need to ask them a second time. Is this the kind of quality that we have achieved in our own lives? Who are the folk that are going to get further in to the counsels of God, and the blessings of God, and the work of God? Who are they? The people who want position? No. The people who want to exercise power? No, they are out. The people who are going to get far in are the people who are reliable, dependable, faithful, trustworthy, and God says, 'now I have discovered I have got a very real trust in you and I am going to give you a great deal to do! Can God trust you? to pray for somebody? to go after somebody? to do His will? Whether you are thanked or not; whether anybody notices you or not; whether you are praised or not.

What a choice letter this is, what a lot we can see in this close up of Paul. I wonder if we had a close up of you, a close up of me, would there be anything like this to write about. I wonder.

o o O o o

Hymns. 87, 523.